



Enslaved Labor on Southern Plantations

Selections from the WPA interviews of formerly enslaved African Americans, 1936-1938

Over 2300 former slaves were interviewed during the Great Depression of the 1930s by members of the Federal Writers' Project, a New Deal agency in the Works Progress Administration (WPA).

Note: Selections from the narratives are presented as transcribed. Black interviewees often referred to themselves with terms that in some uses are considered offensive. Some white interviewers, despite project guidelines for transcribing the narratives, used stereotypical patterns of representing black speech. See "A Note on the Language of the Narratives" at lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snlang.html and "Guidelines for Interviewers" at nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai/wpanarrsuggestions.pdf.

'Bout all I remembers bout slavery was how hard the hands had to work. We sho did haf to work! When we wasn't clerin new ground and rollin pine logs an burnin brush we was er buildin fences and shuckin an shellin corn. Woman you don't know nufin bout work! We cler new groun all day den burn brush and pile logs at nite. We build fences all day and kill hogs and shuck corn dat night. No use to say word bout bein tired. Never heard nobody complainin. They went right on singin or whislin'. Started out plowin and drappin corn then plantin cotton. Choppin time come on then pullin fodder and layin by time be on. Be bout big meetin time and bout fo that er was over everybody was dun in the cotton field till dun cold weather. I remembers how they sho did work.

Ambus Gray, enslaved in Alabama ■

Old master had a gang of slaves and we all worked like we were putting out fire. Lord child, wasn't near like it is now. We went to bed early and got up early. There was a gang of plow hands, hoe hands, hands to clear new ground, a bunch of cooks, a washwoman. We worked too and didn't mind it. If we acted like we didn't want to work, our hands was crossed and tied and we was tied to a tree or bush and whipped until we bled. They had a whipping post that they tied us to to whip us.

We was sold just like hogs and cows and stock is sold today. They build nigger pens like you see cow pens and hog pens. They drove niggers in there by the hundred and auctioned them off to the highest bidder. The white folks kept up with our age so when they got ready to sell us they could tell how old we were. They had a "penetenture" for the white folks when they did wrong. When we done wrong we was tied to that whipping post and our hide busted open with the cow hide.

We stayed out in the field in a log house and old master would allowance our week's rations out to us and Sunday morning we got one biscuit each. If our week's allowance give out before the week we did not get any more.

Tom Douglas, enslaved in Louisiana ■

Bells and horns! Bells for dis and horns for dat! All we knowed was go and come by de bells and horns!

Old ram horn blow to send us all to de field. We all line up, about seventy-five field niggers, and go by de tool shed and git our hoss, or maybe go hitch up de mules to de plows and lay de plows out on de side so de overseer can see iffen de points is sharp. Any plow gits broke or de point gits bungled up on de rocks it goes to de blacksmith nigger, den we all git on down in de field.

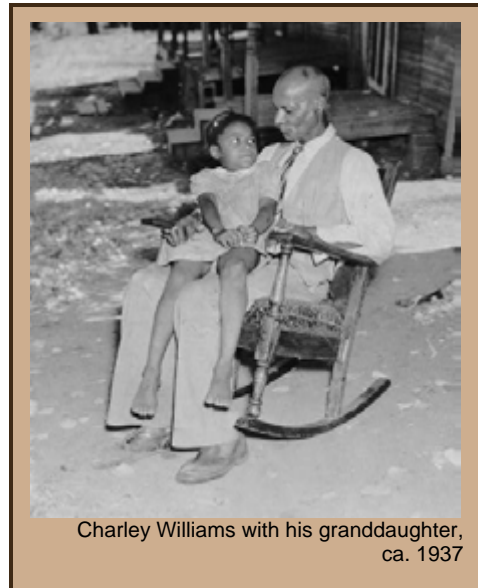
Den de anvil start dangling in de blacksmith shop: "Tank! Deling-ding! Tank! Deling-ding!" and dat ole bull tongue [plowshare] gitting straightened out!

Course you can't hear de shoemaker awling and pegging, and de card spinners, and de old mammy sewing by hand, but maybe you can hear de old loom going "frump, frump," and you know it all right iffen your clothes do be wearing out, 'cause you gwine [going to] git new britches purty soon!

We had about a hundred niggers on dat place, young and old, and about twenty on de little place down below. We could make about every kind of thing but coffee and gunpowder dat our whitefolks and us needed. . . .

All de cloth 'ceptin' de Mistress' Sunday dresses come from de sheep to de carders and de spinners and de weaver, den we dye it wid "butternut" and hickory bark and indigo and other things and set it wid copperas [an iron sulfate]. Leather tanned on de place made de shoes, and I never see a store boughten wagon wheel 'cepting among de stages and de freighters along de big road.

Charley Williams, enslaved in Louisiana ■



Charley Williams with his granddaughter, ca. 1937

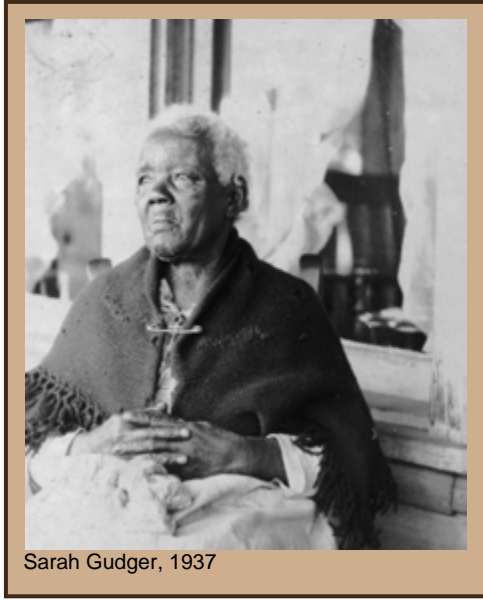
When slaves come in from de fields at night de 'omans [women] cleant up deir houses atter dey et, and den washed and got up early next mornin' to put de clothes out to dry. Mens would eat, set 'round talkin' to other mens and den go to bed. On our place evvybody wukked on Saddays 'til 'bout three or four o'clock and if de wuk was tight dey wukked right on 'til night lak any other day. Saddy nights de young folks got together to have deir fun. Dey danced, frolicked, drunk likker, and de lak of dat. Old Marster warn't too hard on 'em no time, but he jus' let 'em have dat night to frolic. On Sunday he give dem what wanted 'em passes to go to church and visit 'round.

Frances Willingham, enslaved in Georgia ■

I sho' has had a ha'd life. Jes wok, an' wok, an' wok. I nebbah know nothin' but wok. Mah boss he wah Ole Man Andy Hemphill. He had a la'ge plantation in de valley. Plenty ob ebbathin'. All kine ob stock: hawgs, cows, mules, an' hosses. . . .

No'm, I nebbah knowed whut it wah t' rest. I jes wok all de time f'om mawnin' till late at night. I had t' do ebbathin' dey wah t' do on de outside. Wok in de field, chop wood, hoe cawn, till sometime I feels lak mah back sholy break. I done ebbathin' 'cept split rails. Yo' know, dey split rails back in dem days. Well, I nevah did split no rails.

Ole Marse strop us good effen we did anythin' he didn' lak. Sometime he get hes dandah up an' den we dassent [dare not] look roun' at him. Else he tie yo' hands afoah yo' body an' whup yo', jes lak yo' a mule. Lawdy, honey, I's tuk a thousand lashins in mah day. Sometimes mah poah ole body be soah foah a week.



Sarah Gudger, 1937

Ole Boss he send us niggahs out in any kine ob weathah, rain o' snow, it nebbah mattah. We had t' go t' de mountings, cut wood an' drag it down t' de house. Many de time we come in wif ouh cloes stuck t' ouh poah ole cold bodies, but 'twarn't no use t' try t' git 'em dry. Ef de Ole Boss o' de Ole Missie see us dey yell: "Git on out ob heah yo' black thin', an' git yo' wok outen de way!" An' Lawdy, honey, we knowed t' git, else we git de lash. Dey did'n cah how ole o' how young yo' wah, yo' nebbah too big t' git de lash.

De rich white folks nebbah did no wok; dey had da'kies t' do it foah dem. In de summah we had t' wok outdoo's, in de wintah in de house. I had t' card an' spin till ten o'clock. Nebbah git much rest, had t' git up at foah de nex' mawnin' an' sta't agin. Didn' get much t' eat, nuthah, jes a lil' cawn bread an' 'lasses. Lawdy, honey, yo' caint know whut a time I had. All cold n' hungry. No'm, I aint tellin' no lies. It de gospel truf. It sho is.

Sarah Gudger, enslaved in North Carolina ■

■ Us all live in a li'l two-room log cabin jes' off the Big House. Life wan't ver' much for us, 'caze we had to work an' slave all de time. . . .

Massa Jim had 'bout one of de bigges' plantations in dat section. I guess he had nigh onto a hun'erd blacks on de place. I never knowed 'zackly how many thar was nor how big de place was.

De folks now'days is allus complainin' 'bout how dey is havin' sech hard times, but dey jes' don' know nothin'. Dey should hab come up when I did an' dey'd see now dey is libin' jes' lack kings an' queens. Dey don' have to git up 'fo' day when hit's so dark you kin jes' see your han's 'fo' your eyes. Dey don' know what it's lack to have to keep up wid de leader. You know dey was allus somebody what could wuk faster dan de res' of de folks an' dis fellow was allus de leader, an' ever'body else was s'pose to keep up wid him or her whatsomever hit was. Iffen you didn' keep up wid de leader you got a good thrashin' when you gits home at night. Hit was allus good dark when de han's got in from de fiel'. Co'se iffen dar was a lady what had a baby at home, she could leave jes' a little 'fo' de son sot.

Younguns now'days don' know what it is to be punish'; dey thank iffen dey gits a li'l whuppin' from dey mammy now dat dey is punish' terrible. Dey should of had to follow de leader for one day an' see how dey'd be punish' iffen dey gits too far behin'. De bigges' thang dat us was punish' for was not keepin' up. Dey'd whup us iffen we was caught talkin' 'bout de free states, too. Iffen you wan't whupped, you was put in de "nigger box" an' fed cornbread what was made widouten salt an' wid plain water. De box was jes' big 'nough for you to stan' up in, but hit had air holes in hit to keep you from suffocatin'. Dere was plenty turnin' 'roun' room in hit to 'low you to change your position ever' oncet in a while. Iffen you had done a bigger 'nough thang you was kep' in de "nigger box" for months at de time, an' when you got out you was nothin' but skin an' bones an' sourcely able to walk. . . .

Atter de day's work was over, de slaves didn't have nothin' to do but go to bed. In fac', dey didn't feel lack doin' nothin' else. On Satiday dey got up an' washed so's dey could have some clean clothes to wear de comin' week. We wukked all day, ever' day 'cep'n some Sat'days, we had a half day off den. Us didn' git many an' on'y when us as' for 'em. On Sundays us jes' laid 'roun' 'mos' all day. Us didn't git no pleasure outten goin' to church, 'caze we warn't 'lowed to say nothin'. Sometimes even on Chris'mas us didn't git no res'. I 'members on one Chris'mas us had to build a lime kiln. When us git a holiday us rested. Iffen dere was a weddin' or a funeral on our plantation us went. Odderways we don't go nowhar.

Mary Ella Grandberry, enslaved in Alabama ■

■ My mammy she work in de fiel' all day and piece and quilt all night. Den she hab to spin enough thread to make four cuts for de white fo'ks ebber [every] night. Why sometime I nebbah go to bed.

Hab to hold de light for her to see by. She hab to piece quilts for de white folks too. Why dey is a scar on my arm yet where my brother let de pine drip on me. Rich pine war all de light we ebber hab. My brother was a holdin' de pine so's I can help mammy tack de quilt and he got to sleep and let it drop.

I never see how my mammy stan' sech ha'd work. She stan' up fo' her chillun tho'. De ol' overseeah he hate my mammy, case she fight him for beatin' her chillun. Why, she git more whuppins for dat den anythin' else. She hab twelve chillun. I member I see de three oldes' stan' in de snow up to dey knees to split rails, while de overseeah stan off an' grin.

My mammy she trouble in her heart bout de way they treated. Ever night she pray for de Lawd to git her an' her chillun out ob de place. One day she plowin' in de cotton fiel. All sudden like she let out big yell. Den she sta't singin' an' a shoutin', an' a whoopin' an' a hollowin'. Den it seem she plow all de harder. When she come home, Marse Jim's mammy say: "What all dat goin' on in de fiel? Yo' think we sen' you out there jes to whoop and yell? No siree, we put you out there to work and you sho' bettah work, else we git de overseeah to cowhide you ole black back." My mammy jes grin all over her black wrinkled face and say: "I's saved. De Lawd done tell me I's saved. Now I know de Lawd will show me de way, I ain't gwine a grieve no more. No matter how much yo' all done beat me an' my chillun de Lawd will show me de way. An' some day we nevah be slaves." Ole granny Moore grab de cowhide and slash mammy cross de back but mammy nebber yell. She jes go back to de fiel a singin'.

Fannie Moore, enslaved in South Carolina ■

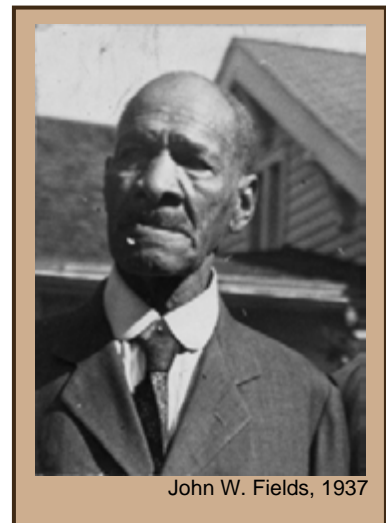
■ Old massa, he wasn't marry and eat de same things de slaves eat.

He didn't work dem in de heat of de day. 'Bout eleven o'clock, when dat sun git hot, he call dem out de field. He give dem till it git kind of cool befo' he make dem go back in de field. He didn't have no overseer. He seed 'bout de plantation hisself. He raise cotton and corn and sweet 'taters and peas and [sugar] cane, didn't fool with rice.

Clara Brim, enslaved in Louisiana ■

■ I remember one incident that I don't like to remember. One of the woman slaves had been very sick and she was unable to work just as fast as he [slaveholder] thought she ought to. He had driven her all day with no results. That night after completing our work he called us all together. He made me hold a light, while he whipped her and then made one of the slaves pour salt water on her bleeding back. My innerds turn yet at that sight.

John W. Fields, enslaved in Kentucky ■



■ Everybody had his own tin plate and tin cup to eat out of. On Saturday they would give everybody three pounds of meat, twelve pounds of flour, twelve pounds of meal, and one quart of syrup. This was to last a week. Us always had plenty to eat 'til the war started, then us went hungry many a day because they took the food and carried it to the soldiers. Us stole stuff from everybody durin' that time.

They always blowed a horn for you to go to work by and get off for dinner by and stop work in the evening by. When that horn blowed, you couldn't get them mules to plow another foot. They just wouldn't do it. Us always et dinner out in the yard, in the summer time, at a long bench. In cold weather us always went inside to eat. Whenever us didn't have enough to eat us would tell the overseer and he seed to it that us got plenty. Our overseers was colored.

Unnamed woman, enslaved in Georgia ■

■ I done field work up dere and even us kids had to pick 150 pounds cotton a day, or git de whoppin'. Us puts de cotton in de white-oak baskets and some dem hold more'n 100 pounds. It 'cordin' to de

way you stamps you cotton in. De wagon with de yoke of oxen standin' in de field for to pour de cotton in and when it full, de oxen pulls dat wagon to de hoss-power gin. Us gin'rally use 'bout 1,600 pounds cotton to make de bale.

Purty soon after Massa Walton opens he farm he die and Missus Walton den marries a Dr. Richardson and he git de overseer what purty rough on us. He want all us to stay right in line and chop 'long and keep up with de lead man. If us didn't it am de bullwhip. He ride up and down and hit us over de back if us don't do de job right. Sometimes he'd git off he hoss and have two slaves hold one down and give him de bullwhip. He'd give it to him, too.



I helped break up de land and plant and chop cotton and a little of everything. Jes' what had to be done at de time, I goes out and does it. I run 'cross plenty snakes and one day one bit me right top de foot. Dere plenty varmints, too.

John Walton, enslaved in Texas ■

... Mr. Young didn't have to worry 'bout his han's runnin' away, cause he wan't a mean man like some of de slave holders was. He never spoke harsh or whupped 'em, an' he didn't 'low nobody else to do it neither.

I remember one day a fellow come from acrost on anudder farm an' spoke sumpin' 'bout Mr. Young bein' too easy wid his servants. He said, "Them darn niggers will think they is good as you iffen you keep up de rate you goin' now, Young." Mr. Young just up an' told him if he ever spoke like dat again he'd call his bluff. Mr. Young told him de he didn't work his people like dey was oxes.

William Henry Towns, enslaved in Alabama ■

I never have to do no field work; just stayed 'round de house and wait on de mistress, and de chillun. I was whupped just one time. Dat was for markin' de mantel-piece wid a dead coal of fire. They make mammy do de lashin'. Hadn't hit me three licks befo' Miss Dorcas, Miss Jemima, Miss Julia, and Marse [Master] Johnnie run dere, ketch de switch, and say: "Dat enough Mauma Ann! Addie won't do it agin'. Dats all de beatin' I ever 'ceived in slavery time.

Now does you wanna know what I do when I was a child, from de time I git up in de mornin' to de time I go to bed? I was 'bout raised up in de house. Well, in de evenin', I fill them boxes wid chips and fat splinters. When mornin' come, I go in dere and make a fire for my young mistresses to git up by. I help dress them and comb deir hair. Then I goes down stairs and put flowers on de breakfas' table and lay de Bible by Marse William's chair. Then I bring in de breakfas'. (Table have to be set de night befo') When everything was on de table, I ring de bell. White folks come down and I wait on de table.

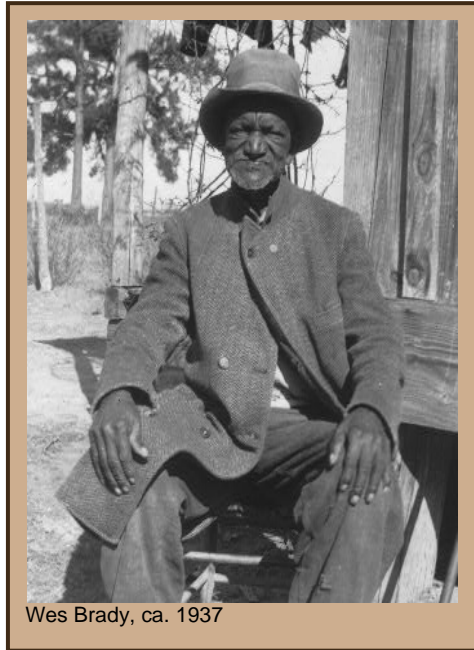
After de meal finish, Marse William read de Bible and pray. I clear de table and help wash de dishes. When dat finish, I cleans up de rooms. Then I acts as maid and waitress at dinner and supper. I warms up de girls' room, where they sleep, after supper. Then go home to poppy John and Mauma Anne. Dat was a happy time, wid happy days!

Adeline Johnson, enslaved in South Carolina ■

You wants me to tell 'bout what kind of house us niggers live in then? Well, it 'pend on de nigger and what him was doin'. Dere was just two classes to de white folks, buckra [master] slave owners and poor white folks dat didn't own no slaves. Dere was more classes 'mongst de slaves. De fust class was de house servants. Dese was de butler, de maids, de nurses, chambermaids, and de cooks. De nex' class was de carriage drivers and de gardeners, de carpenters, de barber, and de stable men. Then come de nex' class de wheelwright, wagoners, blacksmiths and slave foremen. De nex' class I 'members was de cow men and de niggers dat have care of de dogs. All dese have good houses and never have to work hard or

git a beatin'. Then come de cradlers of de wheat, de threshers, and de millers of de corn and de wheat, and de feeders of de cotton gin. De lowest class was de common field niggers. A house nigger man might swoop down and mate wid a field hand's good lookin' daughter, now and then, for pure love of her, but you never see a house gal lower herself by marryin' and matin' wid a common field-hand nigger. Dat offend de white folks, 'specially de young misses, who liked de business of match makin' and matin' of de young slaves.

Rosa Starke, enslaved in South Carolina ■



Wes Brady, ca. 1937

■ I was born and raised in Harrison County [Texas], and I was eighty-eight years old this July and has wore myself out here in this county. . . .

Some white folks might want to put me back in slavery if I tells how we was used in slavery time, but you asks me for the truth. The overseer was 'straddle his big horse at three o'clock in the mornin', roustin' the hands off to the field. He got them all lined up and then come back to the house for breakfas'. The rows was a mile long and no matter how much grass was in them, if you leaves one sprig on your row they beats you nearly to death. Lots of times they weighed cotton by candle-light. All the hands took dinner to the field in buckets and the overseer give them fifteen minutes to git dinner. He'd start cuffin' some of them over the head when it was time to stop eatin' and go back to work.

Wes Brady, enslaved in Texas ■

■ My mother, being one of the household slaves, enjoyed certain privileges that the farm slaves did not. She was the head cook of Mr. Davidson's household.

Mr. Davidson and his family were considered people of high social standing in Annapolis and the people in the county. Mr. Davidson entertained on a large scale, especially many of the officers of the Naval Academy at Annapolis and his friends from Baltimore. . . .

All of the cooking was supervised by mother, and the table was waited on by Uncle Billie, dressed in a uniform, decorated with brass buttons, braid and a fancy vest, his hands incased in white gloves. I can see him now, standing at the door, after he had rung the bell. When the family and guests came in he took his position behind Mr. Davidson ready to serve or to pass the plates, after they had been decorated with meats, fowl or whatever was to be eaten by the family or guest.

Mr. Davidson was very good to his slaves, treating them with every consideration that he could, with the exception of freeing them; but Mrs. Davidson was hard on all the slaves, whenever she had the opportunity, driving them at full speed when working, giving different food of a coarser grade and not much of it. She was the daughter of one of the Revells of the county [Anne Arundel County], a family whose reputation was known all over Maryland for their brutality with their slaves.

Caroline Hammond, enslaved in Maryland ■

■ Whenever white folks had a baby born den all de old niggers had to come thoo the room and the master would be over 'hind the bed and he'd say "Here's a new little mistress or master you got to work for." You had to say, "Yessuh Master" and bow real low or the overseer would crack you. Them was slavery days, dog days.

Harriet Robinson, enslaved in Texas ■

■ We were never given any money, but were able to get a little money this way: our Master would let us have two or three acres of land each year to plant for ourselves, and we could have what we raised on it. We could not allow our work on these two or three acres to interfere with Master's work, but we

had to work our little crops on Sunday. Now remind you, all the Negroes didn't get these two or three acres, only good masters allowed their slaves to have a little crop of their own. We would take the money from our little crops and buy a few clothes and something for Christmas.

Octavia George, enslaved in Louisiana ■

■ Dere wus 'bout twenty-five slaves on de place an' marster jist wouldn't sell a slave. When he whupped one he didn't whup much, he wus a good man. He seemed to be sorry everytime he had to whup any of de slaves. His wife wus de pure debil, she jist joyed whuppin' Negroes. . . .

When marster come ter town she raised ole scratch wid de slaves. She whupped all she could while marster wus gone. She tried to boss marster but he wouldn't allow dat. He kept her from whuppin' many a slave. She jist wouldn't feed a slave an' when she had her way our food wus bad. She said underleaves of collards wus good enough for slaves. Marster took feedin' in his hands an' fed us plenty at times. He said people couldn't work widout eatin'

We didn't have any overseers, marster said he didn't believe in 'em an' he didn't want any. De oldest slaves on the place woke us up in the morning, an' acted as foreman. Marster hardly ever went to de field. He tole Squire Holman an' Sam Sorrell, two ole slaves, what he wanted done an' dey tole us an' we done it. I worked at de house as nurse an' house girl most of de time. . . .

We worked from sunup till sunset wid a rest spell at 12 o'clock of two hours. He give us holidays to rest in. Dat wus Christmas, a week off den, den a day every month, an' all Sundays. He said he wus a Christian an' he believed in givin' us a chance. . . .

I shore believes marster went to Heaven, but missus, well I don't know. Don' know 'bout her, she wus so bad. . . .

Missus died since de surrender, when she got sick she sent for me to go an' wait on her. I went an' cleaned her lak a baby, waited on her till de evenin' she died dat night. I went off dat evenin' late to spend de night an' next mornin' when I got dere she wus dead. I jist couldn't refuse missus when she sent for me even if she had treated me bad.

Ria Sorrell, enslaved in North Carolina ■

■ Master Ingram had a big plantation down near Carthage [Texas] and lots of niggers. He also bought land, cleared it and sol' it. I plowed with oxen. We had a overseer and sev'ral taskmasters. Dey whip de niggers for not workin' right, or for runnin' 'way or pilferin' roun' master's house. We woke up at four o'clock and worked from sunup to sundown. Dey give us an hour for dinner [noon meal]. Dem dat work roun' de house et at tables with plates. Dem dat work in de field was drove in from work and fed jus' like hosses at a big, long wooden trough. Dey had to eat with a wooden spoon. De trough and de food was clean and always plenty on it, and we stood up to eat. We went to bed soon after supper durin' de week for dat's 'bout all we feel like doin' after workin' twelve hours.

Wash Ingram, enslaved in Virginia and Texas ■



Wash Ingram, 1937